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MYSTICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF PLOTINUS  
AND IN THE THOUGHT OF PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS AREOPAGITE

SUMMARY

The primary aim of this doctoral dissertation is to provide a comparative analysis of philosophical and theological thought of Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite with regard to the mystical dimension of their doctrines. Plotinus is universally regarded as a leading representative and (along with Ammonius Saccas) founder of Neoplatonism, a major branch of the Western philosophy in late antiquity, while Pseudo-Dionysius – an anonymous thinker from V/VI century C.E., disguised in his treatises as a disciple of St. Paul, who converted to Christianity in the wake of Pauline speech at Athenian Areopagus – is often considered as one of the most Platonizing Church Fathers, deeply influenced by foremost philosophical currents of his time.

It is the phenomenon of Christian Platonism (or Neoplatonism), and the common recognition of both thinkers as profound mystics, that entails the fundamental question concerning the possible character of Neoplatonic mysticism (embodied in the thought and life of Plotinus) as a purely philosophical way of spiritual life, potentially able to assimilate into various non-Pagan (in case of Pseudo-Dionysius: Christian) belief systems without terminating their identity regarding doctrine and spiritual practice. On the basis of such premises certain research endeavours has been undertaken, aiming to expose the epistemological core of mystical experience as viewed by Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius in accordance with the overall framework of their ontologies, and in order to verify the validity of hypothetical unity of mystical knowledge in (Neo)Platonic tradition. Therefore the main issues of this thesis are consecutively: a) the problem of identity or distinctness of the general object of mystical experience, i.e. One / God / Absolute; b) the problem of similarity or dissimilarity of Plotinus' and Pseu-

do-Dionysius' view regarding the process of mystical ascent, in both instances involving various stages of contemplation, with their epistemic structure being primary object of analysis; c) the problem of general compatibility of cognitive results of both described and experienced respective stages, and especially mystical summits, identical with the union of mystic with the ultimate principle of all things. It is vitally important to add, that metaphysics of Neoplatonism as such consider this principle as absolutely transcendent and unitary, and thus utterly ineffable, which involves significant implications on the field of mysticism, primarily the necessity of perceiving the mystical path as essentially apophatic or negative in nature, i.e. as a process of striving towards the entirely unknowable through a sequence of increasingly radical and dramatic unknowing.

At the same time a decision was made to make an attempt to provide an adequate methodological tools for research, which would constitute a third alternative apart from two general positions in an ongoing discussion on the nature of mystical experience, namely essentialism and contextualism. Essentialist standpoint acknowledges, respectively, that all mystical doctrines, regardless of religion and culture, are evidences of the embrace of single universal truth through supernatural experiences, and contextualist standpoint, contrary to that, deny the existence of such common ground, proving that such experiences are always rooted in particular religious and cultural context, which form and determine their inner contents. Because both described options emphasize exclusively the universal at the expense of the particular, or the particular at the expense of the universal, they can be hardly applied as a methodological base for research, which seeks the commonalities through consideration of differences. In order to find a mediatory solution to the question concerning the nature of mysticism, which would utilize the values of both oppositional positions, this thesis contain the hypothetical proposition, described as moderate essentialism. This proposition provides the basic rules of argumentation in favour of presupposed philosophical allegations.

This dissertation contains five main chapters. The first one of them concerns modern status quo in academic studies on mysticism, especially with reference to such issues, as definitions of mysticism, typologizations of mystical phenomena, and above mentioned debate between essentialists and contextualists. This chapter also deals with the specificity of Christian, i.e. Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox spirituality, treating this matter as a means of support in an attempts to justify the notion of Pseudo-Dionysius' mysticism as both Platonic and essentially Christian.

The second and fourth chapter deal, respectively and exclusively, with mystical philosophy of Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. Each of these chapters divide into two main them-

tic blocks, the first one concerning the ontological background of spiritual practice, and the second one containing epistemological explications of the various stages of mystical ascension on both theoretical and practical level, generally understood in categories of so-called theoretical and practical apophaticism.

The third chapter is an interlude between chapters two and four, and provides a historical insight into the process of assimilation of Greek philosophy into the religious context of Christianity during the Patristic period and the development of Christian Platonism in particular, which is crucial for recognition of Dionysian theologico-philosophical system as mature and reliable exemplification of that current (suitable for such comparative analysis as performed in this dissertation).

Finally, the fifth chapter is a ground for detailed comparison of the material exclusively presented in chapters dedicated to the mystical paths of Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius with regard to their ontological framework, epistemic structure of their subsequent phases and, above all else, positive knowledge understood as the paradoxical result of transrational and radically ineffable coalescence of the soul with Absolute.